

Masonic Temple  
110 West J Street  
Benicia  
Solano County  
California

HABS No. CA-1887

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CAL.  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MASONIC TEMPLE

HABS No. CA-1887

Location: 110 West J Street, Benicia, Solano County, California.

USGS Benicia Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 10.574020.4211755.

Present Owner: Benicia Lodge No. 5, F & A M

Present Use: Assembly and recreation.

Significance: The Masonic Temple is the first hall built by the Masons in California. The building may have been remodeled early in its history but has remained largely unchanged since the 1890s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: This building was apparently started in the fall of 1850 and dedicated on December 27 of that year (Sherman, I:110-113).
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Masonic Temple is located on the west 50' of lot 16, block 28 of the original plat of Benicia. Although the chain of title has not been searched by HABS it is thought that the land on which the building sits was donated to the Masons in 1850 by Alex Riddell. The property was sold by the Masons in 1888 but bought back in 1950.
4. Original plans and construction: The building was apparently built of lumber supplied by Robert Semple and the cost was \$18,000 (Sherman, p. 110).
5. Alterations and additions: It appears that this building has been thoroughly remodeled on the interior. It seems likely that the entire front of the building was also altered at some point early in its existence. On the side elevation the space between the northernmost windows and the front facade is much longer than on the south. There are also definite breaks in the framing in this area, both inside and out. The front facade itself has an asymmetry unexpected after the perfectly balanced rear facade. All of these considerations suggest that the present staircase in

the large front hallway may have been constructed after the rest of the building. If a change did take place, however, it must have been quite early, since photographs presumably taken in the late 19th century show it in its present state.

In 1972 the building was refurbished by Robert E. Bradley, a Vallejo contractor. He moved the building 10' to the rear, sanded and scraped all of the old finish, constructed a new front porch and stairs, and installed a concrete step at the bottom of the rear stairs.

B. Historical Context:

The Masons claim this building as the oldest building constructed by the Masons in California. The Benicia Masonic Lodge No. 5 was founded on March 6, 1850, and included many of the important Benicia pioneers, among them Robert Semple, W. B. Nurse, L. B. Mizner, and Alex Riddell. The building was used by the Masons until 1888, when they sold the property and constructed a new building adjacent to it on First Street. The Masonic Temple has also housed a number of other institutions, including the offices of Solano County, which were located on the lower floor until 1858 when the State Capitol was constructed.

Prepared by: Robert Brueggmann  
Project Historian  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
Summer, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This building is an example of the nineteenth-century frame Greek Revival style.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This two-story building is approximately 30' x 60'.

2. Foundation: Concrete, plastered, with wood piers on concrete footings in the center. A wooden access door is on either side of the south porch through the concrete. There are foundation vents on the east and west.
3. Wall: Wood clapboard with sill band, pilasters on corners with molded capitals, all painted white. Pedimented gables are tongue-and-groove wood.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame construction with wood roof trusses. Two rows of wood columns on the first floor support the second floor. There are three steel tie rods across the building at the second-floor ceiling.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: There is a porch on the northwest corner of the building with concrete floor and seven brick steps. A gabled roof supported by box columns covers the porch. A simple wood banister extends up the steps and along the edges of the porch. Three concrete steps lead from the porch to the south, with the same wood handrail.

In the center of the south side is a porch with concrete floor, seven concrete steps, a pent roof supported by wood columns and a simple wood handrail.

6. Chimneys: There is a metal flue through the wall on the east side of the building.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main (north) entrance is a double doorway with large paneled wood doors, heavy wood surrounds, metal threshold and wood sill. A pair of flush wood doors is in the center on the south side, with wood surrounds.
  - b. Windows and shutters: Wooden windows have six-over-six-light single-hung sashes with wood surrounds. Windows are held in open position with brass spring pins in the jambs. There is a semicircular wood louver in the north gable and a similar one in the south that is boarded up with plywood.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: A gable roof with asphalt shingles covers the building.

- b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed cornice, projecting frieze band, deep rake boards on gable ends, metal gutter with downspouts on the east and west sides.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The entrance opens into a foyer that has a stairway to the second floor. The foyer leads through a double opening into the recreation room. In the southwest corner of the recreation room is an office. Double doors lead from the recreation room to the exterior on the south. In the northeast corner of the building under the stairs is a toilet that opens from the recreation room.
- b. Second floor: The second floor has a foyer across the width of the building at the head of the stairs. There is a storage closet in the northwest corner. The rest of the second floor consists of the assembly hall.

- 2. Stairways: The main stairway is a wide wooden stair in an open well. A round wooden handrail is mounted on the wall at each side. The wood treads have a linoleum cover part way across each. A vertical wood panel railing is around the opening at the second-floor foyer.
- 3. Flooring: Flooring on the first floor is covered with linoleum. Second floor has wood flooring.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls on the first floor have a vertical wood wainscot with fiber panels above and fiber ceiling panels. Second-floor walls are narrow board wood paneling. Ceiling in the foyer is wood board paneling and the same in the assembly room, but with a vaulted ceiling. A picture molding is on the wall in the assembly room.
- 5. Doorways and doors: Wood panel doors with heavy wood surrounds.
- 6. Decorative features: Above a simple wood baseboard forming a recess at the floor are heavier wood baseboards. Windows on the second floor in the assembly room are framed with a molding from the picture mold to the window sill, forming a panel above the windows. A heavy cornice molding is on the east and west walls at the joint of the wall and vaulted ceiling.

7. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: There is a large gas space heater on the first and second floors.
- b. Electrical: In the assembly room are reproduction wall lights in the panels above each window. Lights are oil-type with glass bowl and glass chimney, round metal reflector, supported from the wall by a metal bracket. They are now electrified. Other lighting is modern.
- c. Plumbing: Modern plumbing in the bathroom.

D. Site:

The building sits on the south side of West J Street facing residences. On the east is the present lodge building and commercial businesses, and on the west is the Portuguese Society Lodge Building. Four large palm trees are on the north side. There is a concrete sidewalk across the front and a concrete sidewalk at the west side of the building extending to the south entrance.

Prepared by: John P. White  
Project Supervisor  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
August, 1976

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Early Views: A photograph in the California State Library, 6L #752, shows the building with the words "American Legion Post" on a sign. A similar photograph but with a sign reading "Union Hall" is reproduced in Sherman, p. 50.

B. Secondary and published sources:

Wood, Allen and Company. History of Solano County. San Francisco, 1879, p. 177.

Sherman, Edwin A. Fifty Years of Masonry in California. San Francisco, 1898. Vol. I, pp. 50, 110-113.

Solano County Historical Society, Benicia's Early Glory. n.p.,  
1958, p. 63.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with Exxon Company, U.S.A. (a division of Exxon Corporation) and the Benicia Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of H.A.B.S., the project was completed during the summer of 1976 at the Historic American Buildings Survey Field Office, Benicia, California, by John P. White (Assistant Professor, Texas Tech University), Project Supervisor; Robert Brueggmann (University of Pennsylvania), Project Historian; Kenneth Payson (Cornell University), Architect; and student assistant architects Scott Barnard (University of Pennsylvania); James L. Cook (Texas Tech University); and Gary A. Statkus (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign). The written data were edited by Alison K. Hoagland in the HABS Washington office in January, 1981.